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AUTHOR Foy, William C.
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ABSTRACT

Educational games can make the English classroom a giant playground for natural language opportunities. Some of the games include (1) the use of the animate-inanimate switch for a unit on the language of advertising, where the students use two decks of word cards (one for nouns and the other for adjectives), the purpose being to match the adjective with the noun; (2) the use of alliteration in advertising, in which students make alliterative pairs by matching appropriate card combinations; (3) the use of foreign money to stress the importance of communication (players must trade and communicate with each other to make combinations of different currencies which equal a specified amount); (4) the use of a gameboard divided into three parts (child, parent, and adult), in which players explore particular aspects of that part of the personality and consider qualities which make a winner or loser at living; and (5) the use of literature games. Games, when used wisely with a combination of other activities, can help revive the student and revitalize the English program. (HOD)

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William C. Foy
1750 Wist Place
Honolulu, Hawaii

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A GAME IS NOT A GIMMICK

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Educational games have been receiving a great deal of attention recently as ways of discovering and organizing experience in a number of fields. They are considered valid ways of exploring and packaging ideas about language and literature. But games have also received a great deal of criticism.

Designers of educational games are frequently questioned about their use in the classroom. How can a program be any good if students play games in class? Aren't games just sugar-coated frills--gimmicks that teach nothing? Don't students lose sight of educational objectives when playing games?

A frequent criticism of games is that they allow for and teach competition. Yet, competition is a part of every day living and must be dealt with. Competition in gaming occurs in a way which is less threatening than in real life. Students are not graded on the ways they perform in games.

Gary Shirts of the Western Behavioral Institute has discussed the cooperative nature of gaming.

> Without the cooperation of the participants...games simply would not happen. I'm not sure why the cooperative element of games is so often overlooked. Perhaps it comes from the fact that competiton and all that it implies is so much more interesting, unusual, risky, colorful and attention getting to people of Western Culture than cooperation is, so that when the two are present in the same room, no one notices that cooperation is present.[1]

Certainly, no game can be played without the willingness of the players to come together as a group and to agree to abide by the rules of the game. When rules are imposed by games or by other students, communication lines are more easily opened. Often students seem more willing to share their ideas and accept criticism from their peers than they are from the teacher. Games take advantage of both cooperation and competition. Students realize that winning and losing are part of the game and that they will be able to play again.

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Recently a teacher who was testing a game for the Hawaii English Project commented that the game was of no real value because "the students had too much fun." Yet, one of the most frequently used words in the objectives of English curricula is the word enjoyment. Games can help put enjoyment back into the classroom. They add structure to the child's natural play instinct and capitalize on his way of doing things. Engagement-involvement through games can lead to education for the student. Students have fun, but they also take games seriously. They accept them as honest attempts to create more pleasant learning experiences.

Games based on rote learning offer a greater variety of teaching approaches and more varied repetition than do formalized drills. They seem to lead to more open interpersonal communication. They are structured ways to talk and use language to focus on what is being studied; they can increase the amount and quality of what students say and are sometimes preferable to pencil and paper reactions.

As teachers we are constantly searching for the best available method of teaching and are aware that the richer and broader the variety of approaches, the more likely we are to find approaches suitable to the needs of the individual learner. Games should be added to the growing list of classroom activities which includes reading, writing, viewing, speaking, and creative drama.

Sometimes the criticism of games is justified because of the kinds of games that are being used in the classroom. Most of us are familiar with the pencil and paper games in which students are asked to work through a maze of letters to "find the hidden character" or "find the hidden book titles." In the past, I used them in my own classes. But I suspect that they are generally of little or no real value in the classroom. If it is to be of any value in teaching, a game must have serious educational objectives. Think how more effective a game based on the struggle of character against character, or character against environment would be in experiencing a work of literary art than would be a game in which players match the name of an author with the titles of two,

or three, or four of his works.

In an article in a recent issue of Harpers magazine, Tony Jones gave a description of language which deserves some attention.

> Language seems a giant playground: we swing on the trapeze of imagination, climb the jungle gym of argument, volly at conversation, climb through tunnels of deception, slide into extravagances, shag bon mots, and chase elusive ideas until finally, at the end of the day, nothing catches the mixture of satisfaction and tiredness quite as elegantly as a heavy sigh, the expression of a reality beyond the reach of words.[2]

As we look at this giant playground we must realize that it is the responsibility of each of us as English teachers to be sure that all students experience the language in all its richness. It has been said that there are no "non-verbal" students outside the classroom. This seems true when we observe them in the hallways and on the playground. I would suggest that we make the English classroom a giant playground for natural language opportunities. Where is there a more natural place? As one enters such a classroom he might see students playing with language in a variety of ways. I would like to describe some of the games one might see students playing in such a classroom.

In a game designed for a unit on The Language of Advertising, students explore the animate-inanimate switch. There are two decks of word cards. One deck contains adjective cards with such words as Cheerful, Gold-plated, Transistorized, and Tired. The other deck contains noun cards such as Radio, Family, Audience, Egg beater, and Typewriter. The first player draws one card from each deck and determines if the pair sounds "funny" or "OK". His opponent holds two cards, one labelled OK which refers to pairs that are both animate or both inanimate, the other labelled funny where one word is animate and the other inanimate. The player draws one of the cards from his opponents' hand and determines if that card matches the pair he holds. If the cards match, he keeps them in a stack, if not he returns them to the deck. The game continues until all of the cards have been matched. The winner is the player who collects

the most cards. Players recognize the animate-inanimate switch in such pairs as Cheerful Egg beater and Transistorized Audience, but realizes that a Gold-plated Radio is OK.

At another level of the same game, a player must tell how his combination of words might be used to advertise a product. He may, for example, note that the cheerful egg beater might advertise Christmas eggnog, or the gold-plated radio may be an excellent gift for the person who has everything. He may see the value of a tired typewriter as an advertisement for typewriter ribbons, or a tired family as the basis of an ad for vacation resorts. As he explores the language of advertising, the student realizes that a great deal can be learned about language through such an exploration. He discovers that ad writers are experts at playing with language because their knowledge of language is the equipment with which they sell products.

In another game, students examine the use of alliteration in advertising. They make alliterative pairs by matching such card combinations as Shiny & Chevrolet and Chilly & Chocolate.

Having students experience language usage through playing card games seems much less threatening then do some of the traditional approaches to language study where the teacher is the sole authority figure in the classroom, since the game determines whether the student is right or wrong. Students can seek out examples of various kinds of language usage and create games of their own. The language of the sports page and the sports cast seem natural choices for such a game.

These methods of playing with language can also generate some good ideas for writing as students write advertisements for their own imaginary products, and as they write directions for the games which they create. Learning about language and learning to use language more effectively are both features of this kind of gaming.

A game played with foreign money stresses the importance of communication. Students are given equal amounts of foreign money and are asked to look at its symbols.

Each player also receives an equivalency table. The object of the game is to make combinations of different currencies which equal a specified amount. In order to achieve this players must trade and communicate with each other.

In a game called, "Are You Game" players consider qualities which make a winner or loser at living, and discover that the more we are in touch with our own purposes, the more likely we are to become a winner. The more we play games with ourselves, the more likely we are to be a loser. Players move markers around a gameboard which is divided into three parts of the personality--child, parent, and adult. When he lands on a spot on the board, a player explores a particular aspect of that part of the personality. Spots contain instructions related to winning or losing. Losers "cop out" and move backward or lose a turn. Winners either roll the die again or move forward. Players may be instructed to draw a card from one of two stacks. "Playing Games" cards contain negative behaviors. "Get in touch" cards ask the student to reveal something positive about himself and are related to positive values associated with keeping in touch with one's own goals and purposes.

If the classroom is to become a playground for maximum languaging opportunities, then we must offer opportunities for maximum participation by all students. Developing games that lead to relevant discussion is one of the ways a teacher can offer students natural languaging opportunities. This may be done through literature games as is the case with a game based on Island of the Blue Dolphins. Players focus their attention on Karana's strengths, her qualities of character which help her survive, by matching internal qualities with external actions. The reader is taken into the mind and heart of the character and back to the story through an interpretation game.

When one first responds to Rod Serling's play, A Storm in Summer, he is touched by the expression of affection between the two main characters--Herman, a young black lad, and Shaddick, an old Jewish merchant. In a game based on the play, students move beyond this first, emotional response to examine relationship more closely. They enter

the diverse worlds of Herman and Shaddick by identifying and discussing portions of the dialogue from the play and watch the two worlds converge as the pieces of a puzzle are fitted together.

We don't need to be experts to design new games since most games are based on other games that we already know. As we design educational games, we must keep in mind that they are of value in the English classroom only if they have something to teach, and if they can induce the student to express his ideas and create new language.

Games need not be elaborately produced commercial items. For most classrooms, all that is needed for card games are index cards. Game boards can be made from art supplies. Spinners and dice are inexpensive novelty store items which can be used again and again. All that is needed for designing games are a few basic supplies, thoughtful planning, and the materials which are already available--the language and the literature which are the heart of the English curriculum.

We must be aware that games, like other activities can turn the student off if they are misused. The threat of educational overkill exists with all teaching techniques. Games are not the panacea for the ills of the English Curriculum, but when they are used wisely, with a combination of other activities, other ways of responding to literature and other ways of using language, they can help revive the student and revitalize the English program.

Notes

1. R. Gary Shirts, Occasional Newsletter about Simulations and Games, No. 15, September 1972, (La Jolla, Calif: Western Behavioral Sciences Institute) p. 9.

2. Tony Jones, "Rules of the Game" in Harpers May 1973, p. 5.

3. The Games which are described were all developed by planners at the Hawaii English Project, 1750 West Place, Honolulu, Hawaii.